

# How Fare Egypt's Jews?

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## THE ARAB NEWS REVIEW

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(An American Jew)

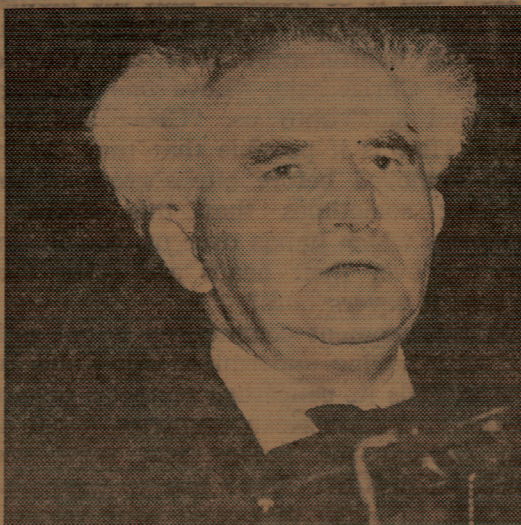
I have been invited by the publishers of *Issues* to set down a few of the impressions I gained during a nine-day stay in Egypt early last March. Before I do so, I want to emphasize that before and during my trip I scrupulously avoided any contact with American Council for Judaism or official Egyptian sources of information in order to be free from any particular point of view with regard to Jews in Egypt. My information comes from the man in the street, mosque, church and synagogue. Nevertheless, one official Egyptian policy was made crystal clear to me before I left home: there is no restriction on American travel in Egypt on the basis of religion. This is perhaps illustrated by the fact that the question of religion appears nowhere on the official visa application of the United Arab Republic.

Egyptians are friendly people. Time and again my companion and I were offered chairs when we stopped for a few minutes to observe some activity. Frequently small merchants in the market would offer us a taste or sample of their wares. Once when our car broke down at night in a little village consisting of a few mud huts, one of the householders brought us chairs and offered us water. On a number of occasions I discussed the Arab-Israel controversy with Egyptians. Their approach was uniform. They are convinced that the Israelis and Zionists are planning to take over all the territory from the Suez Canal to the Euphrates, that Zionism is another form of Western colonialism and imperialism. They readily admit the accomplishments of the Israelis, whom they consider "highly intelligent and educated." This unusual proficiency and skill, the Egyptians said, constitutes the great danger to the Arab world.

We traveled the entire length of the Suez Canal, a restricted military zone. At Ismailia the southern entrance to the Canal, we received a permit which carried with it the right to take pictures at will except for certain military installations. The permit was granted on the presentation of our passports by our driver. No questions were asked, and we took pictures of everything, even movies of the *Inge Toft* being unloaded. At frequent check points soldiers examined our permit and waved us on. Occasionally we were questioned or stopped, but usually we managed the military very nicely. Never was any inquiry made as to our religion. We were Americans and that was enough.

The Egyptians have no difficulty distinguishing Jews, Israelis and Zionists. They are well informed on the difference and point out that "the Egyptian Jews are our blood brothers with whom we have lived in peace for centuries." Indeed, the Jewish community in Egypt extends back to centuries before the common era. After the Exodus, Jews always lived there in peace, free from government discrimination. In 1940, there were approximately 80,000 Jews in Egypt, but today only 10,000 remain—8,000 in Cairo and the rest in Alexandria. Dispersion started gradually during the period of the Palestine mandate when disorder was prevalent around the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, picked up after the emergence of Israel as a State and again in 1952 at the time of King Faruq's ouster, reaching major proportions at the time of the Sinai invasion in 1956.

But the great dispersion or ejection of Jews from Egypt coincided in time and manner with the ejection of several hundred thousand English, French, Greeks, other non-natives and a number of stateless persons. The basis for the ejection was the same in all cases—"foreigners." The up-



David Ben Gurion's government now up in arms after he just returned to Israel after spending ten days in meditation in Buddhist Temple in Burma.

heaval against Faruq was a revolt against foreign domination, both political and economic. Practically all of Egypt's economy, industry and commerce was under foreign control. Approximately one half million foreigners lived in Egypt. Many had been there for generations, all the while retaining the citizenship of their forebears. This applied particularly to the Greeks. Ten years ago there were approximately 200,000 Greeks in Egypt. Today 80,000 remain, many of whom are Egyptian citizens. With few exceptions, no Egyptian citizens are ejected from Egypt. Only a few avid Zionists, declared *persona non grata* by the government, had their citizenship revoked and were deported during the Sinai fighting between Israel and Egypt.

### EGYPTIAN JEWS ARE FREE

I asked a number of Jews—in private as well as in groups at the synagogue—to what discrimination or disabilities Jews were subject. Uniformly the answer was "None. We are Egyptian citizens." A few would qualify the statement with, "Well not officially. When jobs are doled out, first preference is to non-Jews then Jews." When I asked them if there had been any swastika smearing or other Nazi type of manifestation of anti-Semitism, I was assured that absolutely nothing of the kind had occurred.

There are no emigration restrictions on anyone in Egypt. Any Egyptian citizen may leave the country permanently. He must renounce his citizenship in order to obtain an exit visa called a *laissez passer*. He is not given a passport for general travel, except in very special cases. An emigrant is restricted to a small sum of hard currency but may take unlimited amounts of goods out of the country. Very few of the Jews who left Egypt after 1956 went to Israel. Most of them went to Brazil, France, Italy and Australia. Some got to Canada and a few are in the United States.

### MOST JEWS WELL OFF

Practically no Egyptian Jews are interested in going to Israel, although it is easy to get there via Cyprus. A few would emigrate to other countries could they do so without impoverishing themselves. But all of them would pay that price to go to the United States. Most of them enjoy a good economic status. They dress in European style, live in the better quarters of the city, are fairly well educated and send their children to private schools. Arabic and French is spoken in the homes and synagogues.

I attended services one Friday night (5:30 to 7:00; Mincha and Maariv). At least 300 people were there, and they came for worship, not for social intercourse. There was a cantor and a choir. The Hebrew was rapid, with an oriental accent that made it difficult for me to follow. But there were no

short cuts. Young and old alike partook fully and with a fervor that can come only from understanding. The *Yigdal* was chanted from beginning to end by the entire congregation. Yamulkas were worn by most. The younger set wore colourful ones, usually blue and white with the Star of David, and I noticed on a number of them the word "Yerushaliyim" in Hebrew.

After the services I talked with some worshippers and learned that they had good attendance on Fridays, Saturdays and holidays. They had a Schochet, a Talmud Torah, bar mitzvahs, weddings, funerals and the usual Orthodox rituals with no thought of concealing their activities from their neighbours or government. The Jewish community is strictly a religious one. Every year an election is held and twelve directors are selected to look after Jewish charities, hospitals, burial societies, etc. There does not seem to be any "Jewish culture" such as periodicals or theatre. The cultural life of Europeans is the cultural life of the Jews, and he shares Cairo's operas, concerts, art exhibits and literary gatherings with his fellow non-Jewish European Egyptian citizens.

Many of the Jews are businessmen. The largest department store is Jewish-owned. Textile mills and other industries are owned by Jews. A number of the more affluent Jews live in Heliopolis, a Cairo suburb with homes that would look in place in Scarsdale, Highland Park or Beverly Hills. Heliopolis, incidentally, is not a "suburban ghetto;" many of the top brass of the Egyptian Army live there ensconced in real style. Not all of Egypt's Jews are rich, however. Some of them are small merchants operating shops in the bazaars, alongside of their Arab neighbors. Some are in the trades and professions.

On a sightseeing tour of Cairo we were taken to a small synagogue called *Nen Ezra*. It is enclosed within a sort of enclave where several hundred families live and work, forty-two of them Jewish. The Egyptian guide asked the *Shamus* to show us an old Torah. It was ancient and beautiful, inscribed on satin-soft leather. Our Egyptian guide was quite proud of it. He explained that some years ago a Jewish organization in New York offered one million dollars for it. The Egyptian government refused to allow the sale because the Torah is considered a national treasure. We were also shown an old beautifully preserved megillah. The Egyptian explained that the centuries old synagogue was built on the spot where Moses had worshipped. Within the same enclave a short distance away is an old church underneath which is a chamber where Jesus is supposed to have hidden from Herod.

We attended a wedding at the large synagogue. About 150 guests came for the Sunday afternoon ceremony. It could well have been a wedding at any Conservative synagogue in New York, although it was strictly orthodox with orchestral music (Wagner's Wedding March) flower girls, and a *chuppa*,—a large silk *talles* held over the heads of the bride and groom by their parents. The ceremony was in Hebrew and French.

During my stay in Egypt I saw no evidence of any programme or pattern of harassment of Jews in either their religious pursuits or their everyday lives. This is not to say that the Jews in Egypt are enamored of the Nasser regime. Many businessmen in particular are fearful that an arbitrary and sporadic policy of expropriation may strike their business next. But this fear is based exclusively upon economic considerations and is shared by the business community as a whole. There is no attempt made by the government to seize property because it is owned by Jews.

The Egyptian government recently made much of the fact that there was not a single instance of swastika-smearing in Egypt. The absence of such incidents is, I believe, a true reflection of Egypt's attitude toward its Jewish minority.